DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 717 EA 008 268

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TITLE How to Develop Written School Board Policies.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Boards Association (36th, San Francisco, California, April 10-13, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Personnel; *Board of Education Policy; Boards of Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *Manuals

ABSTRACT

The speaker presents the steps to be followed in creating a systematized and up-to-date district manual of board policies and administrative rules. The process was developed by the National School Boards Association's Educational Policies Service. Included are the eight performance objectives identified as stepping stones to the manual, the five decisions a school board must make to get a policy manual project off the ground, and the ten specific tasks administrators must accomplish in order to place an up-to-date policy manual back in the board's hands in three to nine months. (Author/IRT)

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1976 NSBA CONVENTION/SAN FRANCISCO, APRIL 10-13, 1976

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HOW TO DEVELOP WRITTEN SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES
NSBA's 36th Annual Convention
San Francisco, Calif.

I always appreciate such a generous introduction because of the variety of ways I've been introduced. Not long ago, a school superintendent introduced me to his board by saying, "And now we'll hear the latest dope from NSBA."

I'm going to begin with three assumptions: First, you now know what we mean by school board "policies." Second, you are totally convinced that your board's policies should be written down in a comprehensive, up-to-date policy manual. And third, they aren't.

My goal is to tell you exactly what steps to follow to create a systematized and up-to-date district manual of board policies and administrative rules. The process I'll describe can be used in any district, whatever shape your policies are in. It works equally well for districts with no policy manuals at all; for those whose manuals are slightly or hopelessly out of date; and for districts which have manuals, but they contain such vast voids where vital policies should be that they fail to guide administrators through crucial issues.

Now you might expect this to be idle advice, coming from someone who is neither a school administrator nor a board member. And advice is a thankless business, as a friend of mine - a teacher - recently reminded me. We were spending the evening looking over papers her fifth grade students had turned in after a great books unit. And I'll never forget the unconsciously profound summation of one young girl: "Socrates," she wrote, "was a Greek philosopher who went about giving people good advice. They poisoned him."

Actually, the process I'm going to describe was developed by the National School Boards Association's Educational Policies Service - EPS - six years ago. It has withstood the test of time. It has proven adaptable to the nearly 25 percent of the nation's 16,000 school districts that have subscribed to

it over the years. Please keep that percentage in mind as I continue. When what I describe sounds next to impossible to squeeze into your budget or your schedule, remember that the impossible is only something that looks like what nobody can do until somebody does it.

And policy manual projects, as we call the process, have been undertaken by many board before yours.

How do you go about a policy manual project? I prefer to think of the job as a series of decisions -- decisions which are preceded and followed up by some good hard work. It's a team effort. Both the board and the administration play key roles. For those of you who are board members, you'll be glad to know that you're going to be responsible for the decision-end of things. The hard work, administrators, belongs to your staffs.

It is administrators who are responsible for accomplishing the eight performance objectives we've identified as stepping stones to the board's policy manual goal. They are:

1. To identify and code all existing explicit and implied policies of the board. You'll need to concentrate on this objective if you board's policies -- besides being filed in a manual -- also can be found scattered around in student and faculty handbooks, negotiated agreements, board minutes, and so on.
2. If the same is true for administrative rules, objective two should have priority. It is: To identify and code all existing administrative rules, regulations, and other procedural instruments designed to implement board policy.
3. To separate board policies from administrative rules. You should plan to meet that objective if statements adopted by the board or issued by the administration overlap, if they obscure the role of the board as policy-maker and the administration as policy implementer.

4. To identify and reconcile all governing statements which contradict each other.
5. To identify and eliminate all governing statements of the board and administration which are obsolete, trivial in nature, or inadequate as policy guides.
6. To identify and eliminate all governing statements which are contrary to state law, state education department regulations, and attorney general or state education commissioner rulings.
7. To identify vital areas of concern which currently are not covered by written policy and/or rules.
8. To prepare recommendations for board action regarding needed new policies and/or policy revisions.

Those are the objectives. You may need to meet one or all of them to put your policy manual in tip-top shape.

What's your first step as a board? I am going to spend the remainder of my time making two more lists. The first covers the five major decisions a school board must make to get a policy manual project off the ground. The second lists the ten specific tasks administrators must accomplish in order to place an up-to-date policy manual back in the board's hands three to nine months later. That's about how long it takes, depending on what shape your policies are in now.

First, the board.

The first decision the board must come to is recognizing the need for a policy manual project. I don't need to expand on that point. You are here. You came in with at least some inkling that your board's policies could stand a little work.

But how do you go about it? That brings us to your second decision: Should you hire someone from outside to do the job, or assign the task to the administration? Once again, you signed up for this clinic. I'm assuming you want more than a list of reputable consulting firms, although many do an excellent job.

They know their business. And if you don't have a spare administrator who clearly understands the board-administrative function in a school district; loves the logic of a coding system; writes well, and knows the district inside out-- if you don't have an administrator who can devote three to nine months to the project, consultants are great. Of course you pay for their expertise.

You know, I come from a medical family. And physicians, to a man (or to a woman, if you prefer) are a proud lot. For good reason. They've been trained to see and do things the rest of us know nothing about, and we're willing to pay for their expertise. The value of experts is well illustrated by a story my father tells about a fellow who was not a doctor, but who nevertheless had been doctoring himself out of a medical book for many years. He finally succumbed. The cause of death? A typographical error.

That's really true.

But there are jobs that do-it-yourselfers can tackle without fear of fatal retribution. And a policy manual is one of them. I'm assuming you're here for pointers on how to do the job yourself. You've already make decision number two. Now as a whole your board should take some action. You should approve the time and expense necessary for the administration to carry out the project.

Part of the second decision, then, is to estimate your budget. We recommend figuring out five separate costs: (1) the indirect salary cost for a project director who can devote 20 percent to 50 percent of his or her time to the project during its duration; (2) a full-time project assistant for the project's duration; (3) office space and supplies, such as an electric typewriter, a dozen or so reams of paper, file folders, and so on; (4) binders for all copies of the policy manual so you can disseminate them widely; and (5) photocopying and duplication, the cost of which will vary with the number of documents the project director will search and the number of sheets to be included in all final copies of the manual.

I'd love to give you even ball park figures as to the average total cost of policy manual projects. But the factors that affect cost vary so widely from district to district that a figure would be meaningless.

You've made the decision to get the job done, and you've commited yourself financially to do it inhouse. Now you're ready to choose a codification system -- decision 3. The two most widely used are NSBA's alphabetical code and a numerical system (the 1000, 2000 series). Some districts devise their own. You should evaluate as many systems as you can and select the one which will best meet the needs of your school district.

I say "the one that fits best" because no system will fit perfectly. And trying to plug every sentence a particular school board considers policy into a universal coding system can be frustrating. The task calls to mind the two great rules of life, the one general and the other particular. The first, as we all know, is that everyone can, in the end, get what he wants, if he only tries. That's the general rule. Then there's the particular rule: Every individual is, more or less, an exception to the rule.

Actually I was going to do a sixty-second commercial here because I believe your choice of a coding system will greatly affect your satisfaction with the finished manual. Considering my employer, how can I not profess a strong preference for one system over all others? But I'll put my personal biases aside. I don't want to sound like that pompous Church of England cleric who not long ago remarked to a non-conformist colleague: "We are both doing God's work," he said. "You in your way and I in His."

Decision four: Select a project director and an assistant. In choosing the director, you'll want to look for those qualities I mentioned earlier -- an understanding of board/administration roles; an appreciation of the logic of all the categories in the policy classification system you selected; the ability to write clearly and concisely; and someone with sufficient tenure in

the district to be familiar with its past policies and practices, its traditions, problems and aspirations.

And the assistant. That person should be a capable clerk-typist who can do careful, reliable work without close supervision. You'll want someone who'll have no difficulty becoming thoroughly acquainted with your coding system, and who is resourceful in identifying problem areas before they get frozen into final form. But it's got to be someone who also won't mind doing all the cutting and pasting of documents; all typing and duplication; proofreading; collating, and so on.

The board's final decision is to help the project director identify all documents to be searched for existing policies and rules. When NSBA's consulting staff goes into a district, they rely on 18 basic sources. Current district practice usually can be distilled from these documents: (1) the present board policy manual and the state education code; (2) the present book of administrative rules and procedures (3) the last several years' board minutes; (4) the current compensation guide and contract with both professional and nonprofessional staffs; (5) currently active administrative memoranda; (6) current annual budget documents--particularly is they incorporate program goals and objectives, as in a program budget; (7) current teachers' and students' handbooks; (8) board-approved staff committee reports; (9) board-approved citizens advisory and consultant reports; (10) board-approved cooperative agreements with other districts, federal projects and foundations--these documents will have 'guidelines' that have the force of policy; (11) board-approved building program and education specifications; (12) copies of the superintendent's and staff contract forms; (13) purchasing guides, requisition forms, purchase orders, and so on; (14) emergency operating procedures; (15) school calendar; (16) use of school facilities forms; (17) organization charts; and (18) job descriptions.

With those documents in hand, the project director's job really begins.

He or she has ten distinct tasks to perform or oversee. Before I make out that list, another word to the board members:

Board members--either as individuals or as "policy committees"--should not be engaged in project activities. I'm asking you to discourage the eager volunteers on your board who want to dig in and perform the function of project director or assistant. Volunteers cannot be held accountable for their work. In addition, it is very difficult for a board member to identify policies "as they are" and resist the temptation to try to create on-the-spot new policies "as they should be." Also,it is extremely difficult for other board members to criticize or evaluate administrative work done by a fellow board member. It is more important for board members to use their time and energies in looking ahead, planning ahead, and dealing constructively with current policy problems and issues.

Now what are these ten tasks?

This will be very technical advice for policy administrators. And rather than take notes--especially if you're board members--let me invite you to leave one of your stickers with me after we're through, and I'll see that you get a reprint of many of the points I'm making.

We'll call the first task "the searching and first coding." It is the action step the project director must take to achieve the first three objectives we listed earlier: finding and coding board policies and administrative rules, and separating policies from rules. The project director, in this step, should read through all documents, with pencil in hand, and assign a preliminary code to each passage that spells out governing statements from the board and central administration. Along with a code, he--I'm going to use the masculine gender in the universal sense from here on in--should indicate whether the passage is the stuff for board policy or administrative ruling. Or whether it's merely supplementary information. (Explain color coding and "-R" and "-E".)

Task #2 has a name also: We call it "arrangement of source documents." It is a clerical task for the project assistant. The assistant, in this step, should cut out each passage coded by the director, and paste it onto a separate page. The code for each passage should be placed in the upper right hand corner of each page, along with the notation as to whether the passage is a rule or policy. Then, all pages should be put in order--by alphabet or number--depending on the codification system you use.

Task #3-- technical editing and final coding -- takes place when all documents have been arranged by the assistant. It is the action step for attaining objectives 4 through 6: reconciling contradictory statements; eliminating obsolete, trivial or inadequate policy guides; and tossing out statements that conflict with local, state, or federal laws and regulations. In this step, the director first/ reviews the coded sheets, looking for statements that might be combined, or further separated, or cross-referenced or eliminated because they are, on second thought, neither policies nor rules, nor exhibits appropriate for inclusion in the manual. Second, he reviews the preliminary codes he assigned to passages that remain. Once he's satisfied that all documents are categorized to the best of his ability, he proceeds to edit the sheets.

His goal here is to impose the discipline of one writer to raw materials that may have been written by many writers over many years. He will establish and follow a consistent writing style and pattern of punctuation. And he will eliminate redundancies, cut out verbal fat. He will make sure meaning always is clear. This is very important. School board policies should be written for the audience who will read them. Neither staff, students, parents nor other citizens will have an easy time plowing through rows of legalese and educational jargon.

I read a paper the other day on the art of organizational communications. The author was trying to make the point that we too often assign a meaning to

a message and assume that because we know what it means, so should everyone else. He gave some examples they're messages a verterans hospital received in letters from wives, husbands, mothers and fathers of patients.

For instance: "Both sides of my parents are poor and I can't expect nothing from them, as my mother has been in bed for one year with the same doctor, and won't change."

Or: "I am annoyed to find out that you branded my child as illiterate, it is a dirty lie as I married his father a week before he was born."

One more: "In accordance with your instructions, I have given birth to twins in the enclosed enelope."

So much for clarity.

While the technical editing is going on, the project assistant should proceed with task #4: Setting up the central files. You should have a separate legal-size folder for each code employed in your policy classification system. The purpose of these files is twofold: One to hold the/ original copies of all policies and rules, plus whatever copies of each you might want for distribution. And two, to hold resource materials such as sample policies from other districts, news clippings, and similar "policy background" information. Even though you won't have a policy in every code in the classification system, you'll want to collect reference materials in these "vacant" codes so that you'll have plenty of resources should you need to know what the major issues in a given area are in a hurry.

Task #5: Typing. Another job for the assistant. When the technical editing is complete, the assistant will type the master sheets or stencils, following a format suitable for the display of policies, rules and exhibits. Several copies of each master should be made and arranged into collated sets for a final review by the project director and superintendent.

Task #6 tosses the project back to the director for what we'll call the director's review, research, and recommendations. This step calls for a close inspection of the nearly completed project. It will satisfy objectives 7 & 8: Identifying holes in the policy manual, and filling them. All documents should be reviewed with department heads and other staff members as necessary. Dangerous gaps in the manual should be noted. It is at this point that the director will want to research what kind of policy statement the board should have in important areas not covered in the basic documents he researched. At this stage, the director should make full use of the resources of the EPS Policy Information Clearinghouse. Sample policies on virtually any topic are available upon request to school districts subscribing to this service. Then, the director should draft his proposed revised and/or new policies and--where necessary--the companion rules for presentation--through the superintendent--to the board.

Task #7 is the superintendent's review. Once the project director is satisfied with his own work, he should present a draft of his proposed "finished" manual to the superintendent for his careful review and evaluation. The manual is ready to present to the board once the superintendent's suggestions have been incorporated into the manual.

At this point, the board comes back into the picture. Task #8: presentation to the board and board orientation. The superintendent will present the completed manual (including only the "no-problem" policies and rules) to the board with his recommendation that the manual be accepted as an accurate record of past decisions which do not require new approval. The recommended policy revisions or additions drafted by the project director should be presented for the board's subsequent action. Some portion of this presentation should aim at orienting all board members to the rationale, purposes, and characteristics of the manual system being employed.

add 10

Dissemination of the completed policy manual comprises task #9. A mechanical step, but a very important one. The board's policies won't have much effect if no one knows about them. We recommend copies for each board member, key central office staff, principals, employee association leaders, school libraries, and possibly the press and community leaders.

Of course, even after all that work, you might have trouble making people aware of board policy. I haven't seen a policy manual yet on the bestsellers list. The problem was aptly depicted by a new EPS subscriber in Cincinnati not long ago. We were sitting listening to William Safire talk at the A.A.S.A. convention last February, and he handed me a note with his adaptation of a Wizard of Id comic strip. It went like this:

Page: Look Sire! The royal scribe has bound all of your policies in this beautiful volume.

King: You ninny! It's bound on all four sides!

Page: Strange, Sire. It was published a year ago and there has not been one complaint yet!

Let's see. We've got one more task. #10: Maintenance. All will have been for naught if someone on the staff isn't made responsible for keeping the manual and central files up to date. That person should also take charge of coding and disseminating new materials to all manual holders, and recalling the manuals at least once a year to check them for accuracy.

Well, that's a policy manual project. But your manual will never be complete. The process of policy development goes on...and on...and on...

And so apparently do I. I began by saying I'd give you advice, and I'll end up by ignoring some: As every speechwriter knows, if you can't say it in 20 minutes, you should go write a book. I'm going to ignore that advice for one

reason: All that I've said has already been written down in handbooks for board members and administrators. The handbooks, the clearinghouse I've mentioned, the coding system -- and more -- are all part of the National School Boards Association's Educational Policies Service. If you want to know more about this service, see me after the meeting, at NSBA's booth tomorrow, or call me when we all get home.